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UNITED STATES PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE

RUPERT BLUE, SURGEON GENERAL

# FIGHTING TRIM

## THE IMPORTANCE OF RIGHT LIVING

BY

J. M. EAGER

*Surgeon, United States Public Health Service*

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## FIGHTING TRIM.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF RIGHT LIVING.

By J. M. EAGER, Surgeon, United States Public Health Service.

Are you personally fit for the fight—prepared for the hand-to-hand encounter with disease that you are sure to be forced into sooner or later or in which perhaps you are already engaged? Unless you are willing to succumb without a struggle, fight you must, no matter how feeble your fighting proclivities are or what may be your views on pacification. If universal peace among mankind is ever established, there will still be war, war against disease, the war that has always been going on.

Peace between nations may not be an unattainable hope. But man is by no means the worst enemy of man. When the much-desired era of human concord comes and armed strife among men has ceased, there will still be an everlasting battle to fight, a ceaseless struggle for a few years more of health and life, a desperate conflict against a foe who, as far as victory over the individual fighter is concerned, is certain in the end to win—the battle against disease.

The causative agents of disease—harmful physical forces; poisonous chemical substances; noxious living organisms; disturbances of function; the mysterious cause of senile decay, that never-failing death dealer—are the subtlest of foes, adversaries compared with which the most astute and implacable human enemy is bland and easily appeased. They are lurking enemies lying in wait in our safest shelters; often advancing to the deadliest engagement without notice; creeping into our strongholds with the materials of construction or entering with our most indispensable supplies; employing poignantly painful poisons; ruthlessly regardless of helpless childhood, venerable age, beauty, talent, or worth; unrelentingly bound to reattack when repulsed and always victorious in the end. So disguised are they that they often pass unrecognized, though they wound us in our vitals and fill the earth with our bones. Some we know—chiefly the disease germs—and that gives us hope, with even a hint of ultimate triumph. We know that the activities of the disease germ, no matter what shape it takes, are subject to natural laws, and we feel that with the aid of science in the warfare we may penetrate its strategies, outflank its maneuvers, destroy some at least of the marauders, and so, repelling the vanquisher, gain in the midst of war a period of peace in which to live in the beautiful world which is our battlefield and enjoy the companionship of our fellows who with us are exposed to the chances of a cruel war.

In the defense against disease two things are necessary—a systematic union of fighters, the sanitary organization; and personal preparedness, the product of intelligent and diligent personal hygiene.

There is a growing appreciation of the importance of public sanitation, of maintaining the efficiency of the standing army of health. The necessity is admitted of protecting seaports and frontiers from disease invasion; methodically scrutinizing the water and food supply; policing houses and public places; establishing cordons to prevent dangerous communication with the camping grounds of disease; posting sanitary sentinels about the territory from which a sortie is feared; sanitary reconnaissance; and exterminating, wherever found, an enemy that gives no quarter.

Wonderful victories in combating infectious maladies have somewhat diverted popular attention from the equally important personal fortification against disease of all kinds. In sounding the battle cry of sanitation, the note of personal preparedness should ring out. The self-made equipment of the private soldier of health should be kept in the best luster.

Many think of hygiene more as a remedy than as a preventive. They use it as a weapon rather than as a shield. Not a thought is given to it until warned by a skirmish with the enemy. Lucky if the encounter does not become a fight that leaves open wounds and painful scars, or perhaps another corpse on the field of battle.

Of the highest public importance in the organized war against disease is the personal endeavor of each individual to keep well if in good health, or when ill to preserve and increase the residue of health. Most people want to be well. But it is not such an easy thing after all. Like getting rich or staying rich, it requires study and diligence unless one is extraordinarily lucky or is endowed with exceptional natural talents for avoiding unhealthful things. No man as a member of society is morally free to live unhygienically or to acquire disease through lack of personal care. Like a slovenly soldier, he risks imparting to others his loose morale, or even transmitting disease to the whole personnel.

There is a large available mass of literature on health subjects—work, exercise, relaxation, sleep, fresh air, proper temperatures, food, cooking, cleanliness, etc.—that should be judiciously selected and studied. No one is safe from the dangers of disease who is not habitually watchful for the many pitfalls that beset his path. Particularizing in this respect would be an endless warning. Every person must learn for himself what peril threatens in his special place in life. With some it is sloth, gluttony, or other sins bearing equally ugly names; with others it is overweening ambitions, hurtful emotionalism, misdirected mental struggles. Their detection is the part of common sense even from pure self-interest.

Health is man's most valuable possession. Without it he can not hold or enjoy anything else that falls to his lot or that he wins in the battle of life. Without health he is a burden to himself and, unless he possess marked compensatory qualities, an encumbrance to his comrades. Though, as victims of life's ill chance, they are entitled to the most sympathetic consideration, the sick can not but be considered as impedimenta in the conflict of existence. Their place is in the rear. Often, indeed, as easy marks for the attacks of diseases, they become targets drawing the fire of the enemy. Wealth, position, friendship, ability to help others are largely discounted by physical infirmity. Slight degrees of illness make the campaign of life cheerless; advanced degrees render it insupportable.

Studies of health subjects in schools and clubs, the exposition of health in public lectures, newspaper articles, and bulletins, have the salutary tendency to promote wholesome practices as an habitual exercise and to develop the precious quality of automatically choosing in every action and habit of life those courses that conduce to bodily soundness.

Even better is it to have the health-making attitude, so that almost involuntarily every activity, every environment of life, makes for health. That is a profitable talent. It is said one can sometimes get too much money. Though we hear of individuals being "frightfully" wealthy, one can hardly have too much health. Men die leaving useless money—useless at least to themselves—but dying before health is expended is almost a paradox. Health is a possession with which one can richly endow his heirs. The advantage is that he endows his heirs during his own life and does not reduce his own estate a particle thereby. The man possessed of health during his prime, though he die in old age a physical bankrupt, still has endowed his descendants with a priceless fortune. A soldier through and through, he transmits his arms and armor to his sons.

To avoid the waste of inherited health treasures and facilitate their increase, conversations on health subjects are helpful. Curiosity to learn about the distressing symptoms and agonizing features of the maladies of others is of little practical value. It is as disheartening as a bivouac discussion of amputations. In copying the methods of a rich man it is less useful to know how rich he is than to learn how he gets and how he keeps his wealth. So in the case of health it is important to know how the well keep well. Such a topic is as refreshing as a soldier's talk of broad shoulders, agility, or fine fighting qualities. The salutation, "How do you do?" might often be wisely supplemented by the inquiry, "What do you do to keep well?" or "What are you doing to get better?" Valuable hints may thus be had on retaining, fortifying, or regaining health, though informa-

tion so received should be carefully weighed in the same way a financier weighs the points he picks up on business projects.

The search for the fountain of youth has led the wisest far afield and wrecked the hopes of the bravest. There is at hand, in the exercise of hygiene, a means, not of prolonging life indefinitely or even of curing all grave diseases, but of getting the full quota of enjoyable living. Many who grasp at every vaunted cure-all or fashionable recipe for their petty or shameful ills, grossly neglect such simple, health-giving things as exercise, fresh air, and proper house temperature. Any excuse is sufficient to keep them the livelong day in an office chair or rocker like a shiftless soldier mounting the hobby that amuses him or malingering to avoid drill. The eight-hour work day does not help with the slothful. Short hours of labor are for them a hygienic as well as an economic waste; for loafing is often worse for health than hard labor. That they do too much useful work to make exercise for exercise's sake necessary is the excuse of many. It must not be forgotten that useful in-door work is often productive of damage to the body or mind. Professional deformities and mental strain are frequent results calling most imperatively for carefully regulated compensating open-air exercise. Most men, perhaps athletic in youth, grow stale and deteriorate in physical tone after 30; few grown women take sufficient active outdoor exercise.

Decided illness or old age, while by no means precluding physical exercise or life in the open, call for care in this respect. Still, even the feeble and ailing should study their hygienic requirements with a view at first rather to future benefits than to present comfort. Healthful practices, though troublesome in the beginning, soon become a source of pleasure.

Almost every sick person feels the importance of getting well. In such cases the course suggested by hygiene, having in view the preservation and improvement of the remnant of health, is to consult the best available medical or surgical authorities with a view to adopting the most applicable remedies, for not all dilapidations of health can be repaired solely by healthy living. It should be remembered, too, that in sickness the dictates of hygiene are to accept partial or limited relief if that is all that science has to offer—all that the present state of knowledge affords—rather than resort, in desperation or in illusory hope, to pretentious panaceas and fantastic remedial methods. Like sensible campaigners, the sick should report to the infirmary instead of dickering for talismans with camp followers.

The best time to establish a healthful regimen is while the body is free from disease; for setting up a broken-down physique is almost as hard as unscrambling eggs. Sadly enough, the misguided

victim of vicious habits and neglected hygiene can often do little more than cover his deformities with a disguise of neatness, hoping that beneath the mask of starched linen or skillfully knotted ribbon the shameful effects of personal neglect may pass unobserved. Even by good practices tardily but wisely adopted there is little hope of such a delinquent becoming a sturdy veteran whose rugged but life-worn figure inspires younger combatants on the field of life.

People are apt to think of their bodily frailties as misfortunes that come irrespective of acts, vices, or hurtful ways of living unless, indeed, the acts are flagrantly wrong, the vices glaring, and the way of living utterly riotous. The incentives at the bottom of spoiled health are in many cases slight divergences from rational living, neglect, and indulgences that can scarcely be characterized as blameful. Blamable or not, health is none the less undermined by their continuance and the barriers are lowered for disease to enter.

In every campaign the question arises, How much injury will this victory warrant? In the material operations of every man's life similar queries present themselves. How much health is this money worth? is the plain question; or is this dollar or are these hundreds or thousands or millions of dollars worth a weak lung, a leaky heart, a damaged kidney, or a reduced resistance to infection? The answer will depend on a sound and broad sense of values. Many a man adept in money making fails in gauging the comparative value of health. Rich in gold he is poor in health. The heavy gold bag is full of bad bargains. The burden of the treasure is often the soldier's defeat.

On the health of a nation depends largely its wealth, its mental and moral superiority. Aside from the plain dictates of self-seeking, earnest attention to personal hygiene is the patriotic duty of every citizen as an aid to national sanitary defense.

